

# Desiderius Erasmus

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JOHN HENRY NASH

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# Desiderius Erasmus

*Paper read before the Berkeley Club, March 18, 1920.*

*The quotations from the writings of Erasmus are translations  
by Hallam, Froude, Allen, Emerton,  
Hazlitt and others.*

BY

WARREN OLNEY



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*Book of the Year*  
**THE HISTORY OF THE UNITED STATES**

THE HISTORY OF THE UNITED STATES  
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## Desiderius Erasmus

**A**ND DOUBTEDLY Erasmus was the greatest scholar, writer, wit and philosopher of his age. If we consider the state of civilization of his time, the small amount of actual knowledge then possessed by mankind and the limitations of his environment, it will be hard to point out a man in history who was his equal in clearness of vision, literary excellence and learning. The combination of these qualities in one man will always make Erasmus a notable figure in the development of our race.

He was born out of wedlock in Rotterdam, Holland, in 1466 or 1467, probably in the former year. His father was a priest. Of his mother almost nothing is known. In that age the birth of children to a priest, notwithstanding his vows of celibacy, was so common an occurrence as to occasion little or no scandal. The father of the famous scholar Agricola was a priest and boasted of two pieces of good fortune that came to him the same day, the birth of his son and a clerical promotion. The father of Erasmus seems to have been a man of some private fortune, for on his death, when Erasmus was thirteen, he left an estate that his son always claimed was amply sufficient to meet the expenses of the education of himself and an older brother, but was wasted by guardians. Of the older brother we know nothing except that in a letter Erasmus speaks rather contemptuously of him as caring nothing for learning, and loving bodily ease and comfort.

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At the age of nine, Erasmus was placed with his brother in the Deventer School, of which Agricola was master, the most famous school of the age. His mother seems to have accompanied her sons to care for them. This and the notice of her death are the only references to her that I find, except the story told by Jortin in his life of Erasmus, upon which Charles Reade based his romance of *The Cloister and Hearth*. There seems to be no authority for Jortin's story, and it is inconsistent with the fact that she had two sons and Erasmus was the younger. He remained in this famous school for four years, catching up with the older scholars. In after years his expressions of dissatisfaction with his school days was very likely his dissatisfaction with his teachers. It is certain that through all his later student days his mind was so quick and active that he outran his teachers. And when he tried to be a teacher himself, he was so bored by the dullness of his pupils that nothing short of absolute necessity could keep him at his task.

His father and mother both died of the plague when he was thirteen. The next three years, or until he was sixteen, were spent in a school which I take to have been much like the schools of the Christian Brothers of the present. His studies were then interrupted by long sickness. On recovering he was then, as he always afterwards claimed, forced into a monastery by his guardians, who had wasted his estate. He declares that he strongly objected, that his desire was to devote himself to the new learning then making such a stir in Europe, and a monastery was no place for him to pursue his studies. He wanted to go to a university.

It was the same spirit that has over and over again been exhibited by the bright boy against dull parents. "He wants to go to college." Erasmus at sixteen cared for nothing apparently except learning. The amusements of boys of his age did not interest him. He was delicate physically. The Renaissance was spreading from Italy to

all Europe. Printing had come into vogue and numerous editions of the Latin classics were being issued. Notwithstanding the clerical objections to the study of Greek, eager minds, hungry for knowledge, were groping through the mysteries of an unknown language with a vision before them of a new world of literature. It is evident that this boy of sixteen was already in sympathy with the zeal, the thirst for knowledge that made this age the most remarkable in human history, excepting always our own.

Without the means of subsistence at a university, with guardians insisting on a monastery, an older friend to whom he was much attached picturing to him the opportunities he would have for study in a monastery, the result could be foreseen. He took the preliminary vows of a monk, assumed the monastic dress and—hated monasteries and monks ever after.

He spent four years in the monastery, and though in after life he denounced monks and their ways of life with great power and bitterness, yet he certainly did pursue his studies there, for at twenty he had acquired a reputation for learning, ready wit and literary ability. There are some minds so richly endowed and so imbued with a love of learning that a university course is merely an aid, not a necessity. When about twenty, the Bishop of Cambrai, contemplating a visit to Rome, wanted a Latin secretary. The Bishop either knew him or had heard of him, and procured for him a dispensation permitting him to leave the monastery to accompany him on the proposed journey to Rome. The dispensation, however, did not permit him to leave off all the monastic dress. This badge of monkdom was so hateful to him that after he became famous he procured, by direct appeal to the Pope, an additional dispensation allowing him to discard the last vestige of monkish dress.

At twenty he left the monastery, never to return, and entered the service of the Bishop of Cambrai. For some unknown reason the journey of the Bishop to Rome did not take place, but Erasmus spent about five years in his



**Desiderius** household, where he pursued his studies with unabated  
**Erasmus** zeal. He made visits, but for how much time is unknown, to the then and still celebrated University of Louvain, probably for the purpose of study in that library, destroyed by the Germans in 1914. It is reasonably certain that he already knew as much as the professors, and, as later when prosecuting his studies in Greek, was dissatisfied with the best instructors because they could teach him little.

In 1492, the year of America's discovery, he took some additional vows as a priest at Utrecht. He was now twenty-five, with much local reputation as a scholar, wit and poet. Little of his verse has come down to us, for at an early age he gave up versifying. Shortly before all Europe was reading his prose, he made a visit with Sir Thomas More to the children of Henry VII, where he was introduced to the young Prince Henry, afterwards Henry VIII. Erasmus says that the prince asked him for a poem, and that on returning to his lodgings he composed some verse in honor of the prince with much difficulty, because he had given up that branch of literature.

Returning to his twenty-fifth year, we see a young man with much local reputation for wit and learning, but hungering for more knowledge and a sight of the great world. The worthy Bishop consented to his going to Paris to study at the University there, and promised him an allowance sufficient, as the Bishop thought, for his necessary expenses. Here, with a few sentences, I shall dismiss the unpleasant story of his pecuniary troubles that lasted until fame came to him. Much criticism has been expressed of Erasmus' efforts to secure support from wealthy friends. He did, when a student, solicit funds from wealthy friends, and in mature life accepted gifts from those who were in sympathy with him. This is the charge. But the man, and the times in which he lived, must be considered.

As to the man: He had little thrift or ideas of economy.

He felt strongly that he was entitled to a comfortable support, and his delicate and infirm body required it. He maintained that he must have enough income to pursue his studies in reasonable comfort and felt that his great and wealthy friends (he had plenty of them) ought to furnish that income. It should be observed that it was only from those whom he supposed were in sympathy with him that he would accept gifts.

Repeatedly he turned down the most seductive offers from popes and kings rather than surrender his freedom. He felt and said, all through his career, that he must be free from obligation to the great that would come from accepting the honors or emoluments of office. His freedom, he said, was dearer to him than honors or gold. After his reputation was established his friends and admirers gave him enough for his comfortable support. His English friends were specially generous to him.

As to the times: In those days the scholar and writer were dependent on patrons for support, and it was not considered disgraceful for the poor scholar or poet to have friends solicit for him, or for himself to solicit, gifts of money from the wealthy. There was no copyright in those days. No author, ancient or modern, had such a contemporary constituency as Erasmus. No other author's publications ever had so many readers in his own lifetime. In that respect he is in a class by himself. If there had been a copyright law, such as we now have, it would have made him a millionaire.

With promise of an allowance from the Bishop, he went to Paris, professedly to attend the University. In fact, the University had nothing to teach him and he spent little time within its walls. His reputation for wit and learning had preceded him, and he was heartily welcomed by the writers and scholars of the great city. There are indications that his life in Paris was a gay one, but whether it was or not, there is no doubt he did not change his habits of study. All the Latin classics were now at his

**Desiderius** fingers' end. The clergy opposed the study of Greek, but  
**Erasmus** in spite of opposition, and without grammars or dictionaries, the language was being mastered by a few. Erasmus took up the new study with his customary zeal and industry. In one of his letters he says: "I have given up my whole soul to Greek, and as soon as I get some money I shall buy Greek books and then some clothes." He spent six years in Paris, with visits more or less prolonged to his native land. The allowance made by the Bishop was not sufficient and he eked out his income by taking pupils. Though he hated teaching, he became much attached to some of his pupils and they to him. One of his Paris pupils was William Blount, the heir of Lord Montjoy, an English nobleman. Between teacher and pupil an attachment arose that lasted their joint lives. In 1498 Montjoy persuaded Erasmus to visit England with him. There, in the language of today, Erasmus had the time of his life. He was thirty-one, in the full vigor of young manhood, with a reputation much increased by his six years in Paris. The fact that he was the guest of a young and popular nobleman naturally attracted attention. Immediately he was welcomed by as great a galaxy of ability and virtue as England ever possessed. Warham was Archbishop of Canterbury, and thereafter as long as he lived was the friend and patron of Erasmus. Thomas More then was only eighteen, but already recognized as a coming light of the world. As long as he lived he was Erasmus' most intimate friend. It is said that at a Lord Mayor's dinner, Erasmus and More, without previous introduction and not knowing each other, were seated near each other. They got to talking and then to arguing some proposition that one of them advanced. The discussion becoming quite warm, Erasmus said: "You can be nobody but More," to which More replied, "You are Erasmus or the devil."\*

\*This well-known story is thought by the biographers of both More and Erasmus to be apocryphal, because,

they say, More was too young at the time of their first meeting. But though More was very young at the time of



But at this particular period the man who evidently most impressed Erasmus was Colet. Of him, suffice it to say that with great talents and learning he tried to live as Christ would have him live. Christ was his lodestar. And now we see the gay, young, learned Erasmus, already thoroughly disgusted with the superstitions of the church of his time, and turning his thoughts to the early church of the apostles and its founder, finding in his friend a shining light illuminating his mind. He says he spent much time with Colet and their talk was all of Christ and how to live like him. Colet did live like him. Erasmus not always. He had too much temper, and was too easily peeved by criticism to be as nearly a perfect man as his friend. But, for the balance of his life, Christ was ever in his mind. Here with Colet probably came the inspiration that moved him to his great work of the translation of the New Testament. Here it may be well to enlarge a little on what must seem strange to one unacquainted with the history of this time, viz: the ability of Erasmus to converse so easily with his English friends. At that time Latin was the universal, all-prevailing language of the intelligent portion of Christendom. Educated men wrote in Latin, conversed in Latin, thought in Latin. There is no evidence that Erasmus, born in Holland, but living all his mature life in England, France, Germany and Italy, knew any modern language save his vernacular. Likewise there is no evidence that he suffered any inconvenience in his numerous journeys from not knowing the language of the different coun-

Erasmus' first visit to England, he already had a reputation surpassing that of any youth of whom I have read. His father took him away from Oxford about the time of Erasmus' first visit and set him to studying law. He was already the author of English and Latin poems of sufficient merit to have come down to us, and is supposed to have already written the first history composed in the English language, his life of Edward V and Richard III. At twenty his public lectures in London were attracting general attention.

Colet had said of him, "There is but one wit in England and that is young Thomas More." At twenty-four, as member of the House of Commons, he led Parliament in the resistance to a tyrant king's demand for money. Therefore the reason given by the biographers for not believing this story is not sound. If such a story is older than Erasmus and More, which is not improbable, that would not be disproof that these two men reenacted the story when they first met.

**Desiderius** tries through which he traveled. Frequently he complained  
**Erasmus** of the badness of the inns. The description of a German inn in Reade's *Cloister and Hearth* is taken from one of his letters. It seems therefore that the statement that even inn-keepers knew enough Latin to meet the requirements of guests is probably true.

On this, his first visit to England, Erasmus seems to have spent most of his time at Oxford, where he pursued his Greek studies with Grocyn, a notable man of his time, and especially devoted to Greek. Colet tried to get Erasmus to settle at Oxford as a professor and join him in expounding the doctrines of Christianity in the light of reason and common sense. Just why this offer was declined is not certainly known. It is evident that as early as this time he was possessed with the idea of a mission to clear away the absurdities of the theologians and of the dogmas of the church, and bring forward the simple truths enunciated by Christ and the first apostles. As yet I have not found that he at any time maintained any conception of God other than that of fatherhood, but I do find that continually, through his whole life, in season and out of season, he held up Christ as the exemplar of all goodness and virtue. It seems probable that he had doubts of immortality, for in writing about More he expresses much pleasure that More was fully satisfied with the evidence in favor of immortality, as much as to say that he wished he himself were entirely satisfied with the evidence. But however that may be, this is certain, that his two main objects were, first, to increase the knowledge of men, and second, to persuade men to imitate Christ in their lives. His idea was that if men live properly in this world, the rest will take care of itself.

But returning to his refusal of a professorship at Oxford, Emerton thinks that it was because he could not and would not put his neck in a yoke. I am inclined to think that was not all of the reasons, that he had larger plans in view and feared he might have to teach too much, a busi-

ness that he detested. At any rate, he did decline, and thereby, Emerton says, Oxford lost a professor, but the world gained a man. **Desiderius Erasmus**

After about two years spent in England, he returned to France and published his first book, *Adagia*. This book is a collection of sayings or adages of great men, proverbs, epigrams, anecdotes, with his remarks or notes upon them. It was these notes that gave life and interest to the collection. Here he first plies the whip on the backs of the clergy of his time. Here, too, he first assails the political evils of his time and upbraids kings for their follies and crimes. Here is a sentence: "Let any one turn over the pages of ancient or modern history—scarcely in several generations will you find one or two princes whose folly has not inflicted the greatest misery on mankind." Again he says, "Do we not see that noble cities are erected by the people: that they are destroyed by princes? That the community grows rich by the industry of its citizens—is plundered by the rapacity of its princes? That good laws are enacted by popular magistrates—are violated by these princes? That the people love peace: that princes excite war?" Here is one more quotation: "Towns are burned, lands are wasted, temples are plundered, innocent citizens are slaughtered, while the prince is playing at dice or dancing, or amusing himself with puppets, or hunting or drinking."

The author's reputation throughout all Europe was made at once. The book had a prodigious sale. No less than sixty-two editions were issued in the author's lifetime.

The clergy of loose lives howled with rage. The better class were delighted. For instance: Archbishop Warham, his English friend, was so pleased that he carried the book wherever he went and was enthusiastic in its praise. He sent Erasmus money, offered him a benefice if he would return to England. Erasmus declined to return. He now had the ear of Europe and probably was already at work on his translation of the New Testament.



**Desiderius Erasmus** His next publication was the *Euchiridion* or *Christian Soldier's Manual*. This little treatise, like his *Adagia*, had an immense circulation all over Europe. It is hortatory in character, and is a powerful appeal to live a good life, to follow Christ. In the modern phrase, and in a good sense, it has "punch." But though received by the public with immense applause, yet afterwards it was claimed that it contained the seeds of the terrible rebellion against the Church that soon followed. This was because the little book emphasized right living as the way of salvation. One of the charges made against him was that he had denied the existence of a real hell. He replied that he had not denied it—that he merely declared the existence of hell was more clearly taught in theology than in the Scriptures. In a preface to later editions, speaking of those who claimed to be pastors and doctors of theology, he says: "They could never have enough of discussing in what words they ought to speak of Christ, as if they were dealing with some horrid demon, who would bring destruction upon them if they failed to invoke him in proper terms, instead of a most gentle Savior, who asks nothing of us but a pure and upright life." You have here the creed of Erasmus: "A most gentle Savior, who asks nothing from us but a pure and upright life." Keeping this in mind, it is not hard to understand why Erasmus could not endure the creeds of Luther or Calvin and refused to give those creeds his support.

He now again visited England, spending a large part of his time with Sir Thomas More. Then we find him in Italy, where he spent a few years, and obtained his Doctor's Degree from the University of Turin. At Bologna he saw the warrior Pope Julius II make his triumphant entry into the conquered city, with all the splendor that accompanied a successful Roman warrior's triumph. In Rome he was cordially received by the magnates of the Church and became personally acquainted with Cardinal Medici, afterwards Pope Leo X.

He then returned to England, and in 1509 published a little book that caused the world of his time to grin and then to think, the *Praise of Folly*. The title was *Moria*, the Greek word for folly, and a pun on the name of Thomas More, who had inspired its publication. It was issued in 1509, eight years before Luther began his contest with the Church. Whether or not Luther was influenced by its sarcasm on indulgencies and his excoriation of the popes and the clergy, I cannot say, for I have found no statement on the subject, but it is not probable that Luther was unacquainted with what all Europe was talking about. It is reasonably certain that Luther had a general acquaintance with the books put out by Erasmus.\*

There is an ethical quality running all through Erasmus' writings, and his *Praise of Folly*, though jesting with the faults and weaknesses of mankind, contained a moral obvious to thinking men. The book purports to be an oration by Folly, a female, the offspring of Wealth and Youth. Decked out in the garb of the professional fool of that age, with cap, bells, etc., she mounts a rostrum and addresses a mixed audience of all classes and conditions of men. The subject is praise of herself as the goddess whom all men follow. To prove that all men are her followers, she calls to mind the follies of different classes. I can only refer to a few instances cited by Folly in proof of her assertion. First, of indulgences and pardons for sins—and recollect when this was published Luther was still a devout monk—Folly says:

"But what shall I say of those who flatter themselves so sweetly with false pardons for their crimes, who have measured the duration of Purgatory without an error, as if by a water clock into ages, years, months and days. Now suppose me some tradesman or soldier or judge, who by paying out a penny from all his stealings thinks the whole slough of his life is cleaned out at once—all his perjuries, lusts, drunkenness, all his quarrels, murders, cheats, treacheries, false-

\*Since this was in type I have seen an article in the *English Historical Review* which states that as early as 1517

Luther in a letter spoke of "Our Erasmus."

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hoods, bought off by a bargain, and bought off in such a way that he may now begin over again with a new circle of crimes. And is it not much the same thing when the several countries claim for themselves each its special saint, with his special function and his special forms of worship; this one is good for toothache, that one helps women in travail, another restores stolen property; this one shines upon shipwreck and that one takes care of the flocks. There are some that are good for more things than one, and of these especially the Virgin Mother of God, to whom the mass of men now pay more honor than to the Son. The apostles prayed to God; they did not know that to pray to a figure drawn with charcoal on a wall would be equally efficacious."

Then Folly claims that all these things that men get from saints are appurtenances of folly. She says the world is full of fools, yet the priests are glad to get them all for their profit. Then she continues:

"But if some hateful wise man were to arise and say what is true—to live well is the way to die well; you will best get rid of your sins by hatred of vice, tears, vigils, prayers and fasting and a better life, the saint will help you if you imitate his life—I say if a wise man were to come prating such stuff as this, how much happiness he would destroy and what trouble he would bring upon mortals!"

The philosophers and theologians of his time came in for a roasting without a parallel so far as my knowledge of polemics goes. Then he takes up the religious orders and leaves little to be said in the way of accusation and denunciation. One sentence I will give:

"But Christ will interrupt this endless bragging and will demand: 'Whence this new kind of Judaism? One law and that my own I recognize, and that is the only thing I hear nothing about. In that day, using no twisted parables, I promised openly the inheritance of my Father, not to cows and prayers and fastings, but to deeds of love.'"

I will close this account of Folly's address by her reference to the popes. Bear in mind that Alexander VI had died shortly before, and Julius was then on the throne, and observe the intimations of the crimes by which they attained their places. Folly says:

"Those supreme pontiffs, who stand in the place of Christ, if they should try to imitate his life, that is, his poverty, his toil, his teach-



ing, his cross, and his scorn of this world, or if they should think of the meaning of 'pope,' that is, 'father' or even of 'most holy,' what position in the world could be more dreadful? Who would buy it with all his resources, or, when he had bought it, would defend it by sword and poison and every violence? What joys they would lose if once wisdom should get hold of them. Wisdom say I, nay, even a grain of the salt Christ tells us of. What wealth, what honors, riches, conquests, dispensations, taxes, indulgencies, horses, mules, guards, pleasures, they would lose, and in their place vigils, prayers, fastings, tears, sermons, study and a thousand other painful toils of the same sort."

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Observe Folly's reference to the retainers of the church and then to the bishops. She says:

"That this whole swarm (that is to say, the retainers) which now burdens—I beg your pardon—honors the Roman See, would be driven to starvation but for me. This would be an inhuman and abominable deed, but still more execrable would it be that those chief princes of the church and true lights of the world should be reduced to scrip and staff. As it is now, if there is any work to be done, it is left to Peter and Paul, who have plenty of leisure for it—but if there is anything of show or pleasure, they keep that for themselves. And it so happens that, through my assistance, there is scarce any class of men who live more jovially and are less burdened with care. They think they are fulfilling the rule of Christ if they play the part of bishops with mystical and almost theatrical decorations, ceremonies, titles of benediction, of reverence, of sanctity with blessings and cursings."

From the beginning of his career to the end Erasmus detested war. In his opinion it was the greatest of human follies. He followed Cicero, in declaring that a bad peace is better than a good war. Of course Folly, in praising herself, does not omit the benefactions she confers on mankind by war.

Bear in mind that this work was given to the world during the reign of Julius II, the warrior pope. I quote here from Emerton:

"An opportunity for Erasmus to express his usual detestation of war is furnished by his references to the papal warfare, which seems to him the most unjustifiable of all forms of military action. Indeed one may fairly say that in this year 1509 Erasmus had clearly in mind and had already given expression to the views which were to

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form the ground work of the Reformation. This was the year before Luther's journey to Rome, and Erasmus himself was just fresh from the impressions of an Italian residence. The worldly lives of clergymen, from pope to friar, the burden of monastic vows, the ignorance of theologians and their scholastic backers, the follies of superstition, of saint worship, the wickedness of indulgences, the cruel weight of ceremonies which had no support in any worthy authority — all these things were as boldly pointed out by Erasmus in 1509 as they were ever to be shown by any reformer of a later day. The *Praise of Folly* carried his proclamation into a thousand hands that would never have touched the sober, but not more serious, criticism of less broadly human critics."

As a literary success, the *Praise of Folly* was, at that time, without a rival in literary history. No less than forty-three editions were published in the author's lifetime. Since then the translations and publications have continued down to our own time. In 1511 Erasmus published *Copia Verborum*, a book on rhetoric for advanced Latin students. It ran through more than fifty editions in the author's lifetime, and has been often reprinted since.

Erasmus remained in England from 1509 to 1514, living part of the time with Sir Thomas More. His letters describing the More household and ways of life are most interesting. For a time he was at Cambridge giving lectures. In 1511 he writes Colet, "I have finished the collation of the New Testament." It is probable that most of the work on the New Testament was done in England.

The warrior pope, Julius II, died in 1513. Shortly thereafter a play was put upon the stage in Paris, entitled *Julius Exclusus*. Its performance was suppressed by the authorities. This did not, however, prevent its being printed and widely read. It was anonymous, but its sarcasm was so scorching, its style so good, and its Latin so superior that all the literary world immediately ascribed it to Erasmus. It was agreed that there was no other man in Europe who could have written it. People said its author was either the devil or Erasmus. Erasmus' denial of authorship is not very positive. He merely said that he never published anything except over his own name. Sir



Thomas More in an elaborate defense of his friend, written to a cleric who accused Erasmus of heresy, seems to admit that Erasmus was probably the author of *Julius*. Late researches seem to leave no doubt that Erasmus was the author. Of all the bitter lampoons upon a dead pope or king, *Julius Exclusus* is entitled to first place. The spirit of Julius appears at the gate of heaven, followed by the spirits of his warriors, and commands it to be opened. Peter appears and wants to know who it is and what he wants, to which Julius commands:

"Open the gate. Don't you see this key and the triple crown and the pallium?"

Peter replies:

"I see a key, but not the key which Christ gave to me a long time since. The crown? I don't recognize the crown. No heathen king ever wore such a thing, certainly none who expected to be let in here. The pallium is strange, too. Let me look at you a little closer. Hum! Signs of impiety in plenty, and none of the other things. Who are these fellows behind you? Faugh! They smell of stews, drink shops and gunpowder. Have you brought goblins out of Tartarus to make war with heaven? Yourself, too, are not precisely like an apostle. Priest's cassock and bloody armor below it, eyes savage, mouth insolent, forehead brazen, body scarred with sins all over, breath loaded with wine, health broken with debauchery."

Peter then, by questions, makes Julius tell the crimes of his life, how he attained the papacy, the cruel and unjust wars he had waged, all interspersed by sarcastic comments by Peter.

It is said this dialogue between Peter and Julius attained as extensive circulation as the *Praise of Folly*, which means that it was read by all the reading part of Europe.

Erasmus left England in 1514, and never again crossed the channel, though he kept up correspondence with his friends there, and especially with Sir Thomas More, his most intimate friend. Always in after life he retained and expressed the strongest admiration for England and his English friends. From them a large part of his income was derived. From England he went to Basel with the manu-

script of his *New Testament*, and there it was printed by Froben. Froben, one of the world's most celebrated printers, and Erasmus became close friends. On Froben's death his son took his place as friend and publisher. This edition of the *New Testament* contained the Greek text and in a parallel column the translation into Latin, supplemented with numerous notes. The new Pope Leo X approved the work and accepted the dedication of it to himself. Froude, in his usual picturesque manner, says the effect of this publication was a spiritual earthquake, that the notes made the hair of the orthodox stand on end. I will give you one or two notes that justify Froude's statement of its effect. After the text of Matthew xxiii, verse 27, where Christ accuses the Scribes and Pharisees of being whited sepulchres, the note says:

"What would Jerome say could he see the Virgin's milk exhibited for money with as much honor paid to it as to the consecrated body of Christ; the miraculous oil; the portions of the true cross, enough to freight a large ship? Here we have the blood of St. Francis, there Our Lady's petticoat or St. Anne's comb, or St. Thomas of Canterbury's shoes; not presented as innocent aids to religion, but as the substance of religion itself—and all through the avarice of priests and the hypocrisy of monks playing on the credulity of the people. Even bishops play their parts in these fantastic shows, and approve and dwell on them in their rescripts."

Matthew xxiv:23, on "Lo, here is Christ," Erasmus says:

"I saw with my own eyes Pope Julius II at Bologna and afterwards at Rome marching at the head of a triumphal procession as if he were Caesar or Pompey. St. Peter subdued the world with faith, not with arms or soldiers or military engines. St. Peter's successors would win as many victories as St. Peter won if they had St. Peter's spirit."

This *New Testament* went over Europe like wild fire. One hundred thousand copies were sold in France alone. That would be equivalent in these days to millions of copies being sold in one country. Edition after edition were called for as fast as printers could turn them out, Erasmus to the end of his life adding constantly notes and corrections. The first publication was in 1514. In No-

vember, 1517, something over three years later, Luther began his crusade by posting his theses at Wittenberg.\*

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Erasmus

Strange to say, Emerton only makes a brief one-page reference to this world-moving book, while to the *Copia Verborum*, a school book, he gives six pages. But as he too often does he gets in a dig by saying that

"recent scholarship has shown that he not only used very defective manuscripts of no great antiquity, but he failed to make adequate use of the best one at his disposal."

If Erasmus only had defective manuscripts he made most effective use of them, for he anticipated modern biblical scholars in important particulars: for example, he was the first to reject as an interpolation the three witnesses' verse in John's Epistle, viz.: "For there are three that bear record in heaven, the Father, the Word and the Holy Ghost; and these three are one."\*\*

In order to help the common people to understand the Scriptures, he prepared a paraphrase of the *New Testament*, which was translated into all the European languages. The English translation was ordered to be read in all the churches.

In 1516 Erasmus took up his residence at Louvain and remained there for a few years, at first enjoying the fellowship of the professors at the University, but later made uncomfortable by the hostility of some of them because of his heretical tendencies. While in Louvain, Charles V appointed him a Councillor of State. He thereupon produced as remarkable, novel and heretical a document on government as then understood and practised as

\*It is a fact which Protestants have lost sight of that the popularity throughout all Europe of Erasmus' writings, before Luther was heard of, is proof that Christendom was permeated with religious unrest. Germany and France were specially affected and when Luther came to the front he only voiced the feeling of a large part and the best part of the people. What his violence and his theological dogmas

did to bring on revolution instead of reform will be briefly noted further on.

\*\*Mark Pattison in his *Cyclopaedia Britannica* article says of the Greek Testament, that its influence upon opinion was profound and durable; it contributed more to the liberation of the human mind from the thralldom of the clergy than all the uproar and rage of Luther's many pamphlets.



**Desiderius Erasmus** he had produced on the church. As councillor he drew up and presented to the young monarch an address giving advice as to the proper duties of a king. Shortly after its delivery it was printed and, like everything else of his, widely circulated. Never was sounder advice given to king or Parliament or Congress. As usual he was hundreds of years in advance of his time.

It was a novel doctrine in that age that the king was the servant of the people, and occupied his place for their good and not for his own glory. Erasmus asserted that the highest success came from the observance of moral laws, that no taxes should be levied that were not absolutely necessary for the good of the commonwealth, and when taxes were levied they should not, as was the custom, be levied on the necessities of life, but so far as possible on luxuries. Taxes should be imposed on those best able to bear them, viz.: the rich; the poor should not be made more miserable by the king's taxes. He said:

"It may be a good thing to summon the rich to frugality, but to compel the poor to hunger and the gallows is not merely inhuman, but dangerous as well."

The concluding chapter is devoted to the folly and wickedness of war. Finally he asserts that where disputes arise between princes, that instead of plunging their peoples into the horrors of war, they should resort to arbitration. On this feature of the address Emerton says:

"Here is international arbitration, pure and simple, and so far as I know not to be found in any modern writer before Erasmus; a dream as yet in his time and long to remain so, but, in the vast ebb and flow of human affairs, coming ever nearer to some definite realization."

The world was not ready for Erasmus' theory that government was for the good of the people and that arbitration between nations should be resorted to instead of war.

In 1521 Erasmus left Louvain and took up his residence in Basel. He probably left Louvain because he feared Charles V would require him to write against Luther.

In 1523 he published his first edition of the *Colloquies*. It was intended for the use of students of Latin, but so enriched by his notes that it became immensely popular. One bookseller sold an edition of 24,000 in one year. Another printer in Paris, having heard, or perhaps only pretending that he had heard, that the Sorbonne was about to prohibit the sale of the *Colloquies*, got out an edition of 24,000 copies. Observe that Luther began his career in 1517, that the Diet of Worms was in 1521, and that Erasmus, though much abused by the followers of Luther, yet gave out this work in 1523 and 1524. It literally made Rome howl. The rage was not of the wise and good men of the church, but of the great mass of the priests and monks.

Erasmus had the protection of the pope and also of his monarch, Charles V, and of Francis I of France, and the support of the intelligent portion of Europe, and was able to bid defiance to his enemies. If he had lived thirty years more, he would undoubtedly have been burned for his opinions.

The *Colloquies* was the last of the Erasmus great books, though he continued to write, to edit, to publish with ceaseless industry till his death in 1536. He continually put out new editions of his works, with added notes, but without retracting any of his criticisms of the clergy or the superstitions of the church.

We must now, and as briefly as possible, consider Erasmus' relations to the Reformation as it is called. I think that Protestant students of history are coming to an agreement that it was not really a reformation, but a revolution. It was a root and branch rebellion against the church of Rome, carried to a successful issue in Northern Europe and England. Erasmus, in 1521, when Luther appeared before the Diet of Worms, was fifty-five years of age, but in fact much older than his years indicated, weak in body and in the grasp of a painful disease which in that age was incurable. His life had been de-

**Desiderius Erasmus** voted to two objects; first, to advance learning. He maintained that human progress must come and could only come from knowledge. Second, the reformation of the religion of his day. He would apply reason, sound learning and common sense to theological discussion. He had made bitter war on the priests and monks for their immorality, and their encouragement of superstition. He had made war on the theologians and philosophers of his time for their unnecessary and unreasonable dogmas and hair-splitting theories. Many will no doubt think that still greater value should be given to his bringing home so clearly to men's minds that a church intermediary between man and his Maker is not necessary to his salvation. It was the advocacy of this principle that in part gave Luther his hold upon mankind. This constitutes, in my opinion, Luther's only contribution to human progress. But Luther first, and then Calvin, made the dogmas of foreordination, predestination and election basic stones of their theological systems. Erasmus contended that Christ meant what he said when he declared that man's service to his fellowmen was the test of his right to enter the kingdom, and that his theological beliefs cut no figure.

The eagerness with which all that Erasmus published was read shows that he was talking to a sympathetic audience. The better class of the clergy were his friends, likewise Popes Leo, Adrian, Clement and Paul. His young King Charles V was friendly to him and protected him when his clerical enemies sought to deliver him to the inquisition. Francis I wrote to him with his own hand a letter, asking him to come to Paris. Likewise, Henry VIII begged him to come to England. These three young kings were in sympathy with his desire to reform the church, and after Julius the successive popes of his lifetime were not hostile, but all four believed that there should be reforms. The time was ripe for reform, but not for overturning the church.



When Luther, and after him Calvin, not only attacked the church as the whore of Babylon, but promulgated predestination and election as the basic principles of their theology, the moderate reformers were aghast and refused their support. A great Catholic reaction set in. Within the church itself there was a very considerable reformation. Erasmus at first sympathized with Luther. Naturally he would, for he himself for many years had been making war on indulgences, saint worship and other superstitions of the church, the immorality of the clergy, and preaching the necessity of a pure life to reach Heaven. They had some friendly correspondence, Luther begging Erasmus to come out on his side, and if he could not do that, not to attack him; Erasmus urging Luther to be more moderate, to refrain from violence. Erasmus wrote to Luther:

"Generally I think courtesy to opponents is more effective than violence. \* \* \* Old institutions cannot be rooted up in an instant. Quick argument may do more than wholesale condemnation. Avoid all appearance of sedition. Keep cool. Do not get angry. Do not hate anybody. Do not be excited over the noise you have made."

Meanwhile the adherents of the church were clamoring for Erasmus to come out and demolish Luther. Both sides thought and said that Erasmus laid the egg that Luther hatched. Erasmus replied: "Yes, I laid an hen's egg, but Luther hatched a crow's," and he refused to come out for Luther. Luther's doctrine of predestination was so hateful to him that he yielded to his church friends to the extent of publishing a little treatise combatting the doctrine, but further he would not go. The gist of Erasmus' argument against Luther's doctrine of election seems to be that it is impossible to believe that God could deliberately or at all create human beings and destine them to eternal torments without fault of their own.

This untheological but common-sense view of the matter excited the ire of Luther to an extraordinary degree. Luther admitted that here was the root of the discussion

**Desiderius** but denounced Erasmus for questioning the decrees of God. "See him," he said, "crawling like a viper to ensnare simple souls, after the manner of the serpent of old, which whispered in the ear of Mother Eve, and made her doubt the precepts of God."

**Erasmus**

During an illness, in writing to his son John he said, "If ever I get well and strong again I will fully and publicly assert my God against Erasmus. I will not sell my dear Jesus. I am daily approaching the grave—nearer and nearer—and I am anxious, therefore, to lose no time in once more and emphatically asserting my God in the face of all against this bad man. Hitherto I have hesitated. I said to myself 'if you kill him, what will happen?' I killed Munzer and his death at times weighs upon me, but I killed him because he sought to kill my Christ." Afterwards he said in a sermon, "I pray you all to vow enmity to Erasmus." Again to two friends he said, "I recommend it to you as my last will to be terrible and unflinching to that serpent." In a letter to a friend he said, "Christ will judge this atheist, this Lucian, this Epicurus."

Luther retained this animosity to the end of his life.

The larger, more humane and modern view that Erasmus entertained towards Lutherans is seen in his earnest endeavor to prevent their persecution.

The Pope Adrian wrote to him for advice regarding Luther. In reply Erasmus most strongly urged toleration; on no account to persecute Luther or his followers.

So far as my reading goes, he was not only the first to suggest arbitration for the settlement of international disputes, the first to propound the correct system of taxation, the first to proclaim the follies and wickedness of the generality of kings, the first to question belief in dogma as necessary to salvation, the first to insist that we should apply reason and common sense to religion, but the first to maintain there should be no persecution for heresy.

Sir Thomas More in his *Utopia* had described a toler-



ant state church, and no doubt the two friends had agreed on the subject of religious toleration, but More became intolerant, while Erasmus steadily maintained his opinion. He even went so far as to say that Arius must have been a good and wise man and should not have been declared a heretic. Contrast this spirit of Erasmus with that of Calvin, and especially of the latter's treatment of Servetus.

**Desiderius  
Erasmus**

The great artist Durer became a warm personal friend of Erasmus, and left to posterity a portrait of him. Commenting on his personal appearance, he said: "With that sharp nose he hunted down everything but heresy."

His plea for the Bohemian Brethren is a striking instance of his tolerant spirit.

Most of the remaining years of his life were spent in the Protestant city of Basel. The pope tried to get him to come to Rome, holding out the temptation of a cardinal's hat. In 1535, the year before his death, he wrote the pope a polite acknowledgment, but said: "I desire only to go home and find favor with Christ."

While at Basel he was so disgusted with outrages perpetrated on the Catholic churches by Protestants that he left the city for a time and took up his residence in Freiburg, a Catholic city, free at the time from the religious dissensions so distasteful to him, but after a time returned to Basel, where he was esteemed by the people of both parties, though he would not join either, as their most distinguished citizen.

Both Catholics and Protestants have assailed his memory because he would not come out and help in their bitter contest. Even his last biographer Emerton, of Harvard, maintains that he should have stood up and been counted on one side or the other. To me this is most unreasonable. Consider his age, his infirmities, the settled beliefs to which he had devoted his life, the violence of the contending forces and his utter disbelief in the contentions of both sides, his assured belief, often expressed, that learning and

**Desiderius** true religion would be crushed in the conflict. As an honest man, he could not take sides. As an infirm old man, it was quiet he wanted, not war and bloodshed. With the keenness of perception with which he was endowed, he knew that church reform could only come by evolution, that rebellion would bring on a conflict in which the mass of the people would resent attacks on their religion. He saw clearly the religious wars that were bound to come. They did come and for two hundred years large parts of Europe were devastated by cruel and relentless war, and the learning which Erasmus was so eager to acquire and to bestow was nearly drowned in blood.

In 1536, his seventieth year, completely worn out by long illness and unceasing labor, he died. There is no record of a priest or of a minister being called to visit him in his illness or to administer the last rites of the church. If there had been such a visit, it would certainly have been noted by friends who wrote of his death. He died as he had lived, believing that the gates of Paradise are open to him who has served his fellowman.







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